

God's Unchanging Law

We continue looking at teachings from the second category in the Holy See's *Doctrinal Commentary* – teachings set forth definitively, even though not (or not yet) formally proclaimed to have been divinely revealed. 'Every believer...is required to give firm and definitive assent to these truths, based on faith in the Holy Spirit's assistance to the Church's Magisterium, and on the Catholic doctrine of the infallibility of the Magisterium in these matters.' (6)

Today we look at some infallible teachings in the moral area, regarding the sixth commandment in particular. With various well-known moral teachings, it is clear to all that the Church at least teaches them *authoritatively* (the third category of the *Doctrinal Commentary*) – for example in various papal documents or in the *Catechism*. So at a minimum, as with numerous papal teachings, Catholics are to adhere to these moral teachings with submission of will and intellect. (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 25) We are called to accept their truth, and to live them out.

But beyond this, the question can be asked whether various of such teachings are furthermore actually taught *infallibly* by the Church as doctrines *to be held as definitive and irreformable* (second category) – thus unchangeable and to be held definitively by every believer, such that their denial entails no longer being in full communion with the Catholic Church. (6)

Solemn definitions on moral matters are not common. Two examples are found in the Council of Trent's decree on the Sacrament of Marriage (1563), which pronounced anathemas regarding divorce and remarriage, and regarding polygamy. (DS 1807; 1802) However, definitive moral doctrines more frequently come from the ordinary and universal Magisterium.

In its discussion of teachings to be held definitively, the *Commentary* gives three examples of such: the illicitness of euthanasia, prostitution and fornication. (11) The examples seem chosen as if at random, perhaps with the intention of suggesting that many other moral teachings could have been picked instead, and that therefore, from similar reasoning, over the centuries the generality of the Church's basic moral teachings have been taught definitively in this same way.

The *Commentary* explains that 'the infallible teaching of the ordinary and universal Magisterium is not only set forth with an explicit declaration of a doctrine to be believed or held definitively, but is also expressed by a doctrine implicitly contained in a practice of the Church's faith, derived from revelation or, in any case, necessary for eternal salvation, and attested to by the uninterrupted Tradition.' (fn. 17)

One class of teachings that seems to be referred to here (judging from the three examples quoted above) is when bishops across the centuries agree in firmly teaching that a certain type of action is gravely sinful. Avoiding such action is then, in the words of the *Commentary*, 'a practice of the Church's faith...necessary for eternal salvation...attested to by the uninterrupted Tradition'. It would be possible to discern therein a doctrine of the ordinary and universal Magisterium, even without the various bishops explicitly and solemnly declaring its definitive nature.

In recent months we already looked at the infallible teaching of the ordinary and universal Magisterium against direct killing of the innocent, abortion and euthanasia. In addition to the definitive teachings against prostitution and fornication mentioned by the *Commentary*,

documents of the Holy See in recent years name the teachings against contraception and homosexual acts as also being among those that are definitive and irreformable.

Thus the Pontifical Council for the Family, in its *Vademecum for confessors concerning some aspects of the morality of conjugal life* (1997), prepared at the request of St John Paul II and with the help of the expertise of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, stated that ‘The Church has always taught the intrinsic evil of contraception, that is, of every marital act intentionally rendered unfruitful. This teaching is to be held as definitive and irreformable.’

And a 1999 document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, formally approved by Pope John Paul, referring to the standard magisterial teaching that ‘homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered’, criticised a certain priest for calling into question ‘the definitive and unchangeable nature of Catholic doctrine in this area’. (*Notification*, 31/05/1999)

Such documents, never reversed or contradicted, express the mind of the Holy See, and we stay on the safe path by following them. Obviously the documents are not *themselves* infallible, but it is a confusion to suppose that they need to be, for us to accept *the doctrines to which they refer us* as infallibly taught. A somewhat parallel example: we weren’t present when Pius XII infallibly proclaimed the dogma of the Assumption, but we may have read about the proclamation in some religious textbook or heard about it from some priest. The textbook and the priest aren’t infallible, yet they can give us sufficient personal assurance that the dogma itself was indeed infallibly defined and so should be given absolute adherence. The source of the dogma’s infallible authority isn’t the textbook’s author or the priest, but Pius XII.

Similarly, non-infallible texts of the Holy See can give us sufficient assurance that the ordinary and universal Magisterium has indeed infallibly taught some doctrine. Based on that personal assurance, we rightly and confidently take the further step of giving definitive adherence to the doctrine itself, the infallible authority of which comes, not from the non-infallible text of the Holy See, but from the consensus of popes and bishops across the ages.

Someone viewing God’s teachings and laws as a burden to be minimised or even an ‘invasion’ of our lives might seek loopholes to escape obligations of giving assent, definitive or otherwise. On the other hand, someone seeing divine teachings and laws as gifts leading us to the fullness of life and salvation will eagerly seek out those teachings, and will be open to accepting reasonable sufficient evidence that this or that teaching is indeed among those to be held definitively. Ultimately, individuals will each answer before God concerning their openness to his truth during their lives. Was their failure to recognise and live by some divine truth reasonable and excusable, or did they deliberately close their eyes to truth? Only God can judge.

Our focus here is on the definitive moral teachings themselves, as saving divine truths that set us free. (cf. *Jn* 8:32) Naturally, a pastoral perspective will place these in the wider context of the divine mercy freely available for those who do fall, and will consider possible limitations on knowledge or freedom that might reduce an individual’s culpability. Teaching concerning divorce will recognise the plight of innocent parties in marriage breakdown and will distinguish divorce from annulment. The sinfulness of contraception will be set alongside the legitimate path of natural family planning. Teaching concerning homosexual acts will distinguish these from the homosexual tendency or inclination, which is not in itself a sin. And for all those involved, innocent or sinners – and the lives of all of us are a blend of both – we walk side-by-side with them in charity, accompanying and helping each other on the path to salvation.